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The Geopolitics of International Aid and its Influence on Afghanistan's Post-2021 SDGs Priorities

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ABSTRACT

Since the Taliban's returned to power in 2021, Afghanistan faced widespread international isolation and a severe shortage of development aid. This study assessed how the geopolitical context of international aid affected Afghanistan's achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The need for this study arose because no scholarly analysis had previously examined the relationship between political conditions of aid, regional rivalries, and Afghan needs. The study relied on interviews with 20 university lecturers and a thematic analysis of documents. The main finding showed that international aid, which had previously focused on long-term development, became limited to addressing short-term humanitarian needs. Aid was made conditional on values such as women's rights, inclusive governance, and freedom of expression principles that conflicted with the Taliban regime's policies. These conditions hindered long-term development, with particular attention to SDGs 4, 5, 8, 9, and 16. Similarly, USA, China, Pakistan, and Qatar used aid for political influence, not to meet the needs of the Afghan people. This study concluded that effective aid required transparency, local ownership, and a needs-based approach rather than political conditions. It recommended that international donors adopt a neutral, needs-driven strategy that supported sustainable development without intensifying domestic political tensions.

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Introduction

Afghanistan has historically been a center of international political competition, proxy wars, and foreign intervention due to its geographical location. This location, while of strategic importance, has also exposed Afghanistan to persistent instability, political pressures, and widespread economic dependence. Following the political transition in August 2021, when the Taliban returned to power, the country has faced an unprecedented economic and development crisis. According to a World Bank report, Afghanistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has declined by more than 20 percent, nearly 97 percent of the population is at serious risk of poverty, and international financial assistance to Afghanistan has been cut by about half (World Bank, 2023). This assistance, which previously formed an important foundation for Afghanistan's state-building, fiscal, and economic stability, has now largely taken the form of humanitarian assistance. Due to these developments, Afghanistan's development goals, especially the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have faced severe obstacles (UNDP, 2022).

In the current context, this study is particularly valuable because it analyzes the geopolitical aspects of international aid on the one hand, and the impact of international conditions, sanctions, and indirect political pressures on Afghanistan after the Taliban came to power on the other. Existing research mostly assesses the stage before 2021, but the impact of recent developments, changes in the nature of aid, increased conditionality, and international political interventions has been largely ignored. This study fills this research gap, and assesses the extent to which international aid conditions and policies are consistent with the real needs of Afghan society. It also analyzes whether this aid is moving Afghanistan towards economic self-sufficiency, or making it more dependent on foreign aid.

Furthermore, the study provides important and practical recommendations for policymakers, international institutions, and Afghan institutions. It highlights that international aid should be aligned with Afghan national needs, development priorities, and actual capacities. Aid conditions should be free from political agendas, transparent, accountable, and ensure the sustainability of social services. The study emphasizes that aid should not focus solely on the provision of urgent humanitarian services, but should also provide broader opportunities for economic infrastructure, human capital development, regional markets, and the Afghan productive sector (SIGAR, 2023; OCHA, 2023). Eliminating political pressures, conditional aid, and regional competition are vital for Afghanistan's development.

The urgency of this study is heightened by the fact that Afghanistan is facing three major challenges at the same time: international political isolation, a crippled banking system, and a lack of legitimate international interaction. International institutions such as the UNDP, IMF, and World Bank have either suspended or completely suspended their development strategies due to the Taliban's lack of legitimacy (UNDP, 2023; World Bank, 2023). These conditions have created a dangerously precarious situation for Afghanistan's development, and if the current aid conditions and geopolitical principles are not reassessed, the country's economic future, aid sustainability, and domestic capacity building will be severely damaged. This is why this study provides sound, scientific, and practical guidance so that Afghans can take steps towards a self-sufficient, stable, and national economy without foreign aid.

In light of this analytical and practical need, this study aims to analyze the geopolitical aspects, conditions, political objectives, and impacts of international aid. The study attempts to show how international aid has been subordinated to the political agendas of donor countries, and how this situation has negatively affected Afghanistan's sustainable development goals. The study also assesses whether international aid is aligned with Afghan realities, and whether it is a means of economic stability, or whether it only keeps the country dependent on continued aid. With all this, the study attempts to present practical alternative strategies that can enable Afghanistan to move beyond the orbit of conditional international aid, and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals based on self-reliance, accountability, transparency, and national capacity.

The main research question is how have the geopolitical implications of international aid affected Afghanistan's development process after 2021, especially the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? This question raises four sub-questions: first, is international aid and its political conditions aligned with Afghanistan's real development needs? Second, are these conditions and international political pressures strengthening Afghanistan's economic stability, or are they only leading to long-term dependency? The third question is, what long-term positive or negative consequences does such conditional, politically and geopolitically structured aid have for Afghanistan? And the fourth is, how can Afghanistan achieve a self-sufficient economy without foreign aid, and pursue a development process free from the effects of foreign pressures and conditional policies?

Theoretical Framework

Realism: Self-Interest, Anarchy and Power Politics

Realism is a classical theoretical framework of international relations that views the international system as anarchic, that is, a system in which there is no central authority, and states compete with each other for survival, power, and security. According to this view, international aid is used primarily to enhance the self-interest, political influence, and economic influence of donor states, rather than for purely humanitarian reasons [1]. As Khan & Altaf also note, donor states seek to achieve their strategic goals through aid, such as regional security, opening new markets for their companies, or influencing foreign policy [2]. In this framework, aid is seen as a means of balancing power between states. Donor countries use this aid to build their international alliances, reduce the influence of competitors, and spread their values [3]. For example, a country that advocates for women's rights or a free-market economy may attach conditions to aid that ensure political or value loyalty to the rich country [4]. Therefore, the implementation of the SDGs is also influenced by the policies and priorities of donors.

Constructivism: Values, Identity and Normative Influence

In contrast to realism, constructivism theory believes that international relations are not based solely on material power, but are defined by values, identities, and social interactions. From this perspective, international aid not only pursues strategic objectives, but also reflects the values of donors, such as human rights, women's education, freedom of expression, and the expression of human emotions [5]. Therefore, if the issue of aid to Afghanistan is viewed from this perspective, aid is not only a means of power competition or economic monopoly, but also reflects the cultural and value identity of donors. Aid conditions, such as women's education, the free operation of non-governmental organizations, or support for freedom of expression, are considered to be reflections of these values. Similarly, according to Constructivist theory, aid is not only a political tool, but also an attempt to spread universal values.

Dependency Theory: Economic Exploitation and Structural Inequality

Dependency Theory criticizes the international system from an economically focused perspective, arguing that the international system is structured in such a way that rich countries maintain a monopoly on poor countries, which they use to expand their companies, cultural values, and political influence. The theory claims that international aid is a form of neo-colonialism rather than development [6]. According to this perspective, Afghanistan, like other countries that receive continuous aid, faces economic instability due to the cessation or conditionality of international aid on the one hand, and the risk of losing long-term development opportunities on the other. This situation undermines Afghanistan's political power and hinders the development of an independent economic system. Furthermore, this theory believes that donor countries try to create markets for their economic institutions, issue their own laws, and spread their own culture instead of local values, which prevents long-term self-sufficiency. The analysis of the above theories shows that realism explains the political power and self-interest behind international aid well, but this theory alone cannot explain all the dimensions of international aid. The addition of constructivism and dependency theories also reveals the value, cultural, and colonial dimensions of aid. Therefore, this study is based on this theoretical diversity to provide an in-depth, multi-dimensional, and critical assessment of the international aid situation in Afghanistan, the conditions of aid, and its development process.

Geopolitical Aspects of International Aid

Geopolitics, a term first coined by Swedish scholar Rudolf Kielen, describes how a country's geography – such as location, natural resources, climate, and borders – influences international politics [7]. This theory has now taken on a central role in the analysis of international aid, as aid has become a tool not only for humanitarian purposes but also for strategic objectives, the balance of power, and the expansion of global influence. The geopolitical dimension of international aid reveals the complex relationships between development, diplomacy, foreign policy, and security calculations [8,9].

Historical Relationship between Aid and Foreign Policy

According to the literature, aid has been used largely as an instrumental tool of international politics. McLaughlin argues that after World War II, development aid programs were part of

the Cold War political competition between the US and European powers, not just a humanitarian endeavor [10]. Through aid, the world powers sought to strengthen their allies, reduce the influence of the socialist bloc, and spread Western values. Beyne & Moratis study shows that the decision-making process for international aid is still driven by geopolitical interests, and that this process is also subject to domestic politics and domestic pressures within international institutions (such as USAID, DFID, GIZ) [11]. This indicates a phase of the political use of aid in which aid is conditioned on the terms of "good governance", "transparency" or "human rights", but behind it lies political calculations.

The Politics of Conditionality and the Weakening of Sovereignty
The conditionality of international aid, which has become a central policy of international institutions since the 1990s, has been described by several scholars as a "neocolonial agenda." Niyonkuru argues that these conditions – such as implementing state reforms, implementing a market economy, or holding elections – pose a direct threat to the national sovereignty of recipient countries [12]. Because of conditional aid, donor countries can obtain contracts for their companies through political pressure, or export their own cultural agendas. Dijkstra demonstrates in a key analysis that a kind of strategic game is underway between donor countries and recipient bureaucracies, in which each side tries to ensure its own survival [13]. Donors look to expand their influence, while recipient institutions prioritize the continuation of aid, which harms both parties and makes aid lose its original purpose.

The Role of Humanitarian Institutions in the Deepening Crisis of International Aid
Lyshol argues that NGOs, once symbols of impartiality, humanitarianism, and independence, have now come under the influence of donor country policies [14]. These institutions are forced to accept donor conditions for their funding, even when these conditions conflict with their core principles – impartiality, independence, and human dignity. This situation poses a serious threat to the legitimacy of international aid.

Energy, Economics and New Strategies
New geopolitical elements, such as energy security and industrial transformation, are also influencing the geography of aid. Bozhko et al. show that energy resources and pipeline politics have now become an important part of aid focus, as countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia (such as Azerbaijan) are framing these interactions in their energy policies [15]. Similarly, Adamson & Han show that in the light of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, international development funding is now linked to training, technical skills, and lifelong learning and that this assistance should also be aligned with the SDGs [16].

The Afghanistan Experience: The Consequences of Aid Dependency
The case of Afghanistan is an important case for the geopolitical analysis of international aid. According to the World Bank, international aid accounted for almost 40% of Afghanistan's GDP from 2002 to 2020 [17]. This aid played an important role in the areas of education, health, infrastructure, and security, but at the same time it also created a kind of economic dependence. After 2021, when international aid stopped, it was proven that Afghanistan had not yet reached a self-sufficient economic system, and aid was not managed without strategic calculations [18]. This in-depth literature review shows that the geopolitical dimension of international aid is not simply a matter of balance of power, but a complex web of systematic interactions of values, economic interests, humanitarian principles, and international institutions. Therefore, any study that assesses the impact of international aid – especially in a country like Afghanistan – must provide a deep cross-dimensional analysis of politics, economics, governance, values, and scientific perspectives on development. The impact of aid should be assessed not only from numerical criteria but also from value, cultural, and political perspectives.

Aid Conditionality and Geopolitical Interests
Aid Conditionality and Geopolitical Objectives
International aid is often tied to conditionality, with donor countries seeking to impose conditions that serve their own economic or political interests [1]. These conditions may require recipient countries to implement specific economic reforms, governance reforms, or other programs. For example, some countries provide aid to counter terrorism or to secure strategic areas [16]. Such conditional aid can undermine aid effectiveness if it takes priority over basic humanitarian needs [8]. Also, aid is often given to donor countries or to countries that are political or strategic allies of donor countries, even if these countries do not have serious needs [19].

The Harms of Aid Conditionality and Local Trust
When aid is subordinated to foreign political interests, suspicion and distrust of aid increase. This situation is a major obstacle to local cooperation and the sustainability of development projects [9]. The legitimacy of aid objectives is reduced and aid organizations are sometimes caught in a conflict between the countries seeking support and their own principles [16]. Several researchers emphasize that an impartial and disinterested aid approach should be adopted to ensure the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [10].

The Impact of Geopolitical Competition on Aid Distribution
The distribution of international aid is closely linked to the geopolitical situation, whereby donor countries give priority to countries that are in line with their political, cultural or strategic interests [11,20]. For example, historically, countries rich in oil and gas, or those that had important positions of influence during the Cold War, have benefited from aid [19]. Also, since the Cold War, the US and other powers have distributed aid to meet their political goals [17].

Geopolitical Impact on International Aid to Afghanistan
Before 2021, international aid to Afghanistan was based on the fight against terrorism, regional stability, counter-narcotics, and humanitarian needs [21]. Since 2015, Afghanistan has adopted all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and focused on various areas such as education, health, gender equality, and economic growth [20]. However, since the Taliban came to power, development aid has decreased and most aid has been allocated only to humanitarian needs [8,22]. Donors are wary of working directly with the Taliban and work with the United Nations and NGOs [23].

The Role of New Donor Countries and the Long-Term Impact of Aid
New sources of aid to Afghanistan, such as Qatar and China, are expanding aid based on their specific geopolitical objectives [18]. At the same time, the Taliban government is facing a loss of trust from other donor countries due to human rights and governance problems [22]. Due to this situation, development programs such as education and health sectors are not receiving significant resources, which is a major obstacle to the SDGs [24].

Balancing Humanitarian Needs and Development Goals

The increase in humanitarian aid, especially in the area of food security (SDG 2), has created obstacles to long-term development goals such as creating sustainable jobs (SDG 8) [24]. Additionally, the Taliban's closure of girls' schools and restrictions on women's rights are major obstacles to community development that impact SDG 5 and other goals [25,26].

Impact of Political Instability and Regional Rivalries

Geopolitical rivalries and support for or opposition to the Taliban government have a direct impact on Afghanistan's security stability and development [27]. Regional powers such as Iran, Pakistan, and Russia are seeking to increase their influence in the region and are also playing a role in the distribution of aid in this regard [28]. Although this cooperation promotes regional stability (SDG 16), it has also shown negative effects on human rights restrictions [25].

Post-Taliban Governance and International Engagement

Post-Taliban Governance and Economic Situation

Afghanistan has long been a focus of foreign intervention, regional rivalries, and international power struggles due to its geopolitical location. Later the Taliban's Interim Administration (ITA) came to power in 2021, Afghanistan's economic situation deteriorated sharply; its GDP contracted by 20.7%, falling to 6.2% in 2022, 2.7% in 2023, and 3.2% in 2024 [17,29]. Although international aid continues to contribute to economic stability, this stability is highly fragile and fragile [30]. The banking system is plagued by weaknesses and payment system problems, which hinder economic development [17]. This situation poses serious challenges to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Impact of the Economic Crisis and Humanitarian Situation

Despite the improvement in household conditions, nearly half of Afghans still face poverty and unemployment rates remain high [30]. The decline in international aid and the deepening economic crisis have led to poverty, hunger, and a lack of basic services, posing a serious threat to the SDGs' goals of ending hunger (SDG 2), health (SDG 3), and poverty reduction (SDG 1) [11,23].

Geopolitical Impact and International Aid

After the Taliban's resurgence, the international community has been wary of direct engagement due to the Taliban's human rights abuses and the existence of some terrorist prisoners [20]. Competition among global powers, prioritizing regional interests, and aid conditionality have complicated the distribution of aid [11]. Neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Iran, and China pursue their geopolitical interests and use aid as part of their diplomatic strategies [23]. This conflict poses challenges to achieving SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions).

Aid Conditionality and the Importance of Human Rights

Many donor countries insist on human rights, especially women's rights, as conditions for aid, an issue that is in conflict with the Taliban regime [23]. Tying aid to human rights and governance reforms may lead to conflicts between the Taliban and donors, which in turn affect the implementation of development programs [11].

Relevance to the Sustainable Development Goals and the Way Forward

As it stands, Afghanistan's development is subject to complex interactions between international aid, the Taliban government, and international political pressures. Emergency assistance in the areas of food security and health is important, but long-term development requires economic reforms, ensuring women's rights, and implementing transparent governance, all of which are directly linked to the SDGs [18,20]. The international community must work together to prioritize the needs of Afghans and expand cooperation to make aid more effective and sustainable.

Materials and Methods

This study is a qualitative study that aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the geopolitical impact of international aid on Afghanistan's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Two main methods were used to collect data: First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 lecturers, who were selected from private universities in Nangarhar province. These lecturers were experts in the fields of international relations and political science, and held master's degrees. Participants were selected through "purposive sampling" to provide accurate, scientific, and factual views relevant to the research objectives. Second, an in-depth study of academic sources, research articles, reports, and official documents was conducted to examine the relationship between international aid, geopolitical goals, and Afghanistan's development needs. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire, which had five main sections: the geopolitical nature of international aid, aid allocation and distribution, priorities for the SDGs, policy-making decisions, and aid effectiveness. Each section had three or four sub-questions. The interviews were mostly conducted face-to-face, the duration of the interviews was usually 20 to 30 minutes. The demographic characteristics of the participants were as follows: all 20 were male, all participants had a master's degree. Their specialization was law and political science, and their professional experience ranged from 5 years. Informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure research ethics, and the confidentiality of names and personal information was maintained, and all participants were given the right to withdraw from the interview or not to respond at any stage. This study was conducted after approval from the relevant university ethics committee, in order to comply with international standards of research ethics. For the analysis, the interview transcripts were analyzed through thematic coding and four key themes were extracted. In addition, a comparative analysis between the documents and the interviews was also conducted to make the results more reliable, in-depth, and balanced.

Result

The findings of this qualitative study, based on semi-structured interviews and an extensive literature review, show that since 2021, the geopolitical context of international aid has had a profound negative impact on Afghanistan's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). After the Taliban came to power, major international donors such as the US, the World Bank and the IMF have suspended development aid. Now, only emergency aid such as food, health and support for the displaced continues, while long-term development goals have been neglected. Current aid is tied to conditions on women's rights, girls' education and human rights, which are at odds with the Taliban. This situation has weakened aid and prevented the achievement of development goals. China, Pakistan and Qatar are now more active in Afghan affairs, and aid has become a tool of influence. This aid is mostly for their own geopolitical goals, not to meet the real needs of Afghans. The lack of a legitimate government, frozen assets, and lack of international recognition have forced donors to channel aid through the United Nations and NGOs, which in turn reduces local ownership, increases bureaucracy, and reduces effectiveness. The following key findings were obtained through thematic analysis of the interviews and comparison of secondary sources:

The Political Nature and Values of International Aid

Most interviewees believe that international aid is not only humanitarian, but has become increasingly subject to political agendas and values. According to Haji Hakim Mushfiq of Alfalah University lecturer (personal communication, February 12, 2024) states: "Women's education, a free press, and the demand for an inclusive government are basic conditions for aid, but they are neither in line with the situation in Afghanistan nor do they respond to the needs of the people." According to Fakhruddin Ekhlasmand of Rokhan University lecturer (personal communication, March 14, 2024) adds: "International powers have used aid as a tool for soft power; they want to deal with values, not just needs." In this regard, Kalsoom and Cevik show that international aid is a tool for promoting Western values, not just humanitarian cooperation [5,20].

Impact of Economic Collapse and Aid Cuts

After the Taliban came to power, the withdrawal of international aid has plunged Afghanistan into a deep economic crisis. 17 interviewees said that the sudden withdrawal of development aid has led to poverty, unemployment, and economic weakness. Afghanistan's GDP shrank by nearly 20% in 2022. Emergency aid is not enough to provide the foundations for long-term stability. Abdul Wali Atif, a lecturer at Al-Taqwa University (personal communication, April 16, 2024) says: "We cannot survive without aid, this is a fact; our economy is in ruins, banks are half-functional, and unemployment is at its peak." According to Muhammad Ibrahim Sekandari, a lecturer at Rokhan University, (personal communication, May 17, 2024) says: "With the withdrawal of international aid, people's lives have also come to a standstill; from cities to villages, there is poverty, famine, and helplessness everywhere." World Economics reported that Afghanistan's GDP fell by 20% in 2021, and by 3.2% in 2024 [29].

Aid Management and Lack of Transparency

Although international aid is now implemented through the United Nations and NGOs, it still faces serious problems of transparency, effectiveness, and coordination. "We don't know where the aid budget is being spent; which programs reach the people and which are just report cards," says Shah Mahmood Ehsas, a lecturer at Alfalah University (personal communication, February 13, 2024). According to Qudratullah Sangeen of Tabesh University lecturer (personal communication, March 15, 2024) adds: "The Taliban have restricted the work of international agencies, and international agencies also have no contact with the government. This situation does not create aid, but chaos." Whittall also wrote that international agencies are caught between their own values, donor pressures and the illegitimacy of the domestic government [19].

Strategic Goals and Assistance of Regional Countries

Most of the lecturers believe that China, Qatar, Iran, and Pakistan use aid in Afghanistan for their own economic, transit, and security purposes. China focuses on mineral resources, while Pakistan and Qatar are trying to increase political influence. 15 participants say that this aid does not meet the real needs of the people, and does not contribute to long-term development. According to lecturer Riazullah Sadiq of Nangarhar University (personal communication, May 19, 2024) explains: "Pakistan is trying to keep the Afghan economy under its pressure, and China wants to obtain Afghanistan's natural resources." According to lecturer Shamsulhaq Saqib of Tabesh University (personal communication, April 11, 2024) says: "Qatar is lobbying for the international legitimacy of the Taliban, and seeks political influence through aid." Akhtar & Manzanay show that regional countries see aid as a means of expanding influence, not as a panacea for human suffering [18].

Threats to the Effectiveness of the SDG Goals

According to the results, many of the long-term SDG goals such as industry, climate, peace and governance (SDG 9, 13, 16) have been neglected, and only immediate needs such as food, health, and support for displaced people (SDG 1, 2, 3) receive focus. Humanitarian assistance is mostly limited to SDG 1 (poverty reduction) and SDG 2 (hunger). Important goals such as SDG 8 (work and economy), SDG 9 (resources), SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 16 (justice and peace) have been neglected. Saqib Fikri, a lecturer at Nangarhar University, (personal communication, April 22, 2024) expresses concern: "Development should be strategic, not seasonal; we need education, infrastructure, and jobs, not just a little bit of help for a month." Sahab et al. and Schmeding & Natanzi also confirm that the SDG goals are at risk due to the political nature of aid [24,31].

Conditionality of Aid and Conflict of National Sovereignty

A key concern of the participants was that the conditions of international aid imposed for dealing with the Taliban undermine Afghanistan's political independence and right to national decision-making. Aid is tied to conditions of human rights and good governance, which are valuable to the international community, but conflict with domestic sovereignty and realities. These conditions, especially in the areas of education (SDG 4) and gender equality (SDG 5), have blocked the way for aid. Hashmatullah Rahmati, a lecturer at Alfalah University, (personal communication, February 23, 2024) clearly stated: "If aid is for us to accept their policies, then it is not aid, it is commercial pressure." Khaliqyar Alokozai, a lecturer at Rokhan University, (personal communication, May 26, 2024) said: "The conditions of the West that come under the name of human rights sometimes directly conflict with the culture, values, and religion of the country." This perspective is also consistent with Ngang and Niyonkuru where aid is interpreted as a kind of "neocolonial pressure", limiting the autonomy of local governments [4,12].

Weak Afghan Government Capacity and Disorganized Aid Absorption Structure

Another important issue that emerged from the interviews was the Taliban government's weak administrative capacity and the lack of a clear and transparent system for managing international aid. This has not only led to disorganized aid, but also to a loss of public trust in it. Tariqullah Malikzia, a lecturer at Al-Taqwa University, (personal communication, March 9, 2024) explains: "The Taliban government has no plan, no strategy, no transparency; aid comes, but it is not clear where it goes." Ansarullah Dawlat, a lecturer at Nangarahr University, (personal communication, April 18, 2024) says: "For aid to be effective, there must be a structured administration and an accountability system, but currently both are lacking." Carment & Samy also argue that the implementation of SDG-16 (peace, justice and institutions) is only possible through capacity building of internal governments, not just through the provision of funds [28].

The Need for Self-Reliance and Development of Domestic Capacities

From the perspective of most lecturers, Afghanistan should not rely on international aid for a long time. Self-sufficiency requires management of domestic resources, transparent governance, and development of sectors. The cessation of international aid has also

been seen as an opportunity for Afghan governments to recognize and strengthen their own capacities. According to Imran Sherzia, lecturer of Alfalah University (personal communication, June 12, 2024) said: "We must learn to rely on our own resources for our economy instead of others; this will take time, but it is not impossible." According to Zahidullah Shinwari, lecturer of Al-Taqwa University also (personal communication, May 6, 2024) said: "Increasing domestic revenues, focusing on agriculture, trade, and mining are also the foundations of self-sufficiency; the government must translate these policies into action." Hakimuddin Manzany, a lecturer at Tabesh University, (personal communication, March 20, 2024) referred to the fight against corruption: "Even if aid comes, until a system of transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption is established, no aid can benefit the people." (Interview 20) This perspective is consistent with Cooper and Carment & Samy, who write that self-reliance occurs when state capacities, internal resources and democratic policies come together [28,32].

International Double Standards and Political Differences in Aid

A key criticism that emerged from the interviews is that international powers have double standards in aid. The lecturers pointed out that some countries accused of human rights violations still receive extensive aid, but aid to Afghanistan is stopped because of women's education or other conditions. According to Jamil Hassanzio of Rokhan University lecturer (personal communication, February 21, 2024) states: "Why do some other countries turn a blind eye to oppressive regimes, but when it comes to Afghanistan, aid is stopped because of women's education? This is political discrimination." Nazifullah Niazi, lecturer of Alfalah University (personal communication, May 17, 2024) put it this way: "The main criterion for international aid is not human needs, but the interests of the powers." Authors such as Ryan & Dolan and Chukwuma have also raised the problem of international double standards, arguing that aid allocation is often subject to international politics [3,26].

Regional Inequality in Aid Implementation and Neglect of Marginal Areas

The interviews also revealed that aid mostly reaches limited segments of the urban and central regions, but remote, tribal, and underserved areas remain largely unserved. This inequality further widens the gap between the government and the people. Fazalwali Wali, a lecturer at Roshan University, (personal communication, May 24, 2024) complained: "Projects are announced in the central cities, but neither budget nor work reaches the districts. There is no fair distribution of aid." Abdul Basit Khedam, a lecturer at Al-Taqwa University, (personal communication, March 15, 2024) said: "In provinces that are under strict Taliban control, institutions do not operate there. This means that the needs of the people are victims of political geography." This concern is consistent with research by Safi, Oral et al. and Zhao et al. which point to geographical imbalances in aid [33,34].

Loss of Social Trust and Threat to the Legitimacy of Aid

Interviews revealed that due to the mismanagement of aid, lack of transparency, and external pressures, people have lost trust in international aid and partner institutions. This has seriously jeopardized the legitimacy of aid. Nazifullah Niazi, lecturer of Alfalah University (personal communication, February 28, 2024) put it this way: "People say that this aid goes into the pockets of bigwigs; it has no connection with the common people. The belief that aid is for the people is dead." Tariqullah Malikzia, a lecturer at Al-Taqwa University, (personal communication, April 24, 2024) said: "If international aid loses the trust of the people, then the influence, cooperation, and sustainable results of the institutions will be zero." Lyshol and Whittall also raised the argument that the legitimacy of aid is based on public trust, not just on budget [14,19].

Discussion

The results of this study show that the geopolitical nature of international aid has negatively impacted Afghanistan's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) post-2021. The lack of development aid, political conditionality, and the lack of a legitimate government have made aid effectiveness, coordination, and sustainability problematic. Interviewees believe that aid is no longer provided solely for humanitarian needs, but has become a means of exporting values, political pressure, and expanding influence. The results show that aid is limited to urgent needs rather than meeting the basic needs of the people, such as education, infrastructure, and employment opportunities. This situation has led to the destruction of the foundations of Afghanistan's long-term development and has severely damaged public trust in international aid.

The results of this study are consistent with numerous international and regional studies. Kalsoom and Cevik argue that international aid has become a means of exporting Western values, not just humanitarian aid [5,20]. Similarly, Whittall argues that international aid agencies are caught between their own values, donor pressures and a lack of domestic legitimacy a situation that is consistent with the current situation in Afghanistan [19]. Carment & Samy argue that implementing SDG 16 (peace, justice, and institutions) is only possible through domestic state capacity, not just through money [28]. This is also consistent with research findings that show that the Taliban government has no clear strategy, transparency, or institutional structure, and that aid is therefore fragmented. Similarly, Schmeding & Natanzi and Sahab et al. also confirm that the SDGs are at risk due to political pressures, unbalanced aid and the lack of a legitimate government [24,31]. This comparison shows that the Afghan context is not unique, but rather a broader problem in international aid policy.

This study provides a picture of the real challenges that the geopolitical dimension of international aid poses to the Afghan development system. The study adds to the understanding that: For long-term stability, aid must be free from political conditions, transparent, and responsive to the needs of the people; An effective, stable, and credible internal system for aid (administrative structure and accountability) must be established; Domestic trust, transparent governance, and revenue generation must be prioritized so that Afghanistan can become self-reliant; The strategies of international aid agencies must cover the entire country, not just the central regions. The limitations of this study should also be considered: This is a qualitative study, so the interpretation of the data is based on the participants' opinions and analytical interpretations, not on statistical evidence; The participants were selected only from universities and intellectuals, not from the general public or aid recipients; This study only assesses the situation after 2021, so it is not possible to assess long-term development changes; Some of the data is based on personal relationships, which may undermine objective impartiality. The conclusion of the discussion is that the main factors behind Afghanistan's development process and the failure to achieve the SDGs are geopolitical politics, weak domestic capacities, lack of legitimate government, and low trust between the people and the government. If international assistance is to achieve reform,

it should prioritize addressing the above issues [35-42].

Conclusion

This study shows that the economic, development and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan after 2021 is deeply linked to international aid and the geopolitical calculations of aid. The main findings of the study are: After the Taliban came to power, development aid has completely stopped, and only emergency humanitarian assistance (such as food, health and support for the displaced) remains; The conditionality of international donors, especially issues of women's education, human rights and Taliban legitimacy, has a profound impact on the distribution of aid; Countries such as China, Qatar and Pakistan use their aid for their geopolitical interests, not to meet the real needs of Afghans; Although aid is implemented through the United Nations and NGOs, it still has problems with transparency, accountability and effectiveness; Afghanistan is still dependent on foreign aid, which hinders the country's economic self-reliance.

This study provides new and deeper scientific insight into the relationship between the political and economic realities of Afghanistan and international aid. It fills a gap that has been poorly analyzed in the post-2021 situation. The study proves that international aid is now distributed not only on the basis of need, but also on the basis of values, pressures and influence. The study also has important practical recommendations for policymakers, international institutions and Afghan institutions to make aid free from political influence, transparent and closer to the needs of the people.

This study was only qualitative. Future research should also assess the volume, impact, SDG indicators and statistical assessment of aid implementation. Some participants refrained from expressing their views due to political pressure. Future research should provide an opportunity to gather candid, fearless views through confidential methods. If international aid is to be a tool for reform, development, and progress, it must be free from geopolitical calculations and political conditions, aligned with national needs, and contribute to the development of Afghans' internal capacities. Therefore, this study not only provides an in-depth analysis of the situation, but also provides a scientific and practical framework for reform.

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